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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [RS](#) [FR](#) [EUN](#)

SUBJECT: GOF SAYS RUSSIA-FRANCE-GERMANY-SPAIN MARCH 18
MEETING FOCUSED ON EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

REF: A. BERLIN 795

[B](#). PARIS 1573

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR JOSIAH ROSENBLATT, FOR REAS
ONS 1.4 B/D

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Laurent Bili, President Chirac's technical advisor on pol/mil and Russia issues, told POL M/C March 21 that the meeting between the Russian, French, German and Spanish leaders on March 18 focused primarily on EU-Russia relations, with the goal of concluding negotiations on the "Four Spaces" of cooperation before the May 10 EU-Russia summit. Unnamed "French government" sources backgrounded the same theme in articles to local press before the summit. Bili said more sensitive issues - Russian domestic politics and Chechnya, among others - were not "taboo," but were only raised in bilateral discussions. Given Russia's importance in Europe, said Bili, the GOF focused on "finding the positive" and not airing disagreements in public. As an aside, Bili bemoaned a mutual "dialogue of the deaf" between the US and the EU on the China arms embargo issue. End summary.

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[1](#)2. (C) Putin arrived in the morning of March 18 and began his day with a series of bilateral consultations with President Chirac, said Bili. Among the issues discussed were Russia's internal drift towards authoritarianism, (although "not in those terms," said Bili) and Chechnya. Bili said there were no "taboo" issues between Chirac and Putin, although the GOF noticed Putin had been more amenable to discussions about Russian domestic issues in 2003 and early 2004. Still, Bili acknowledged that the raising of these types of issues was confined to private discussions between the two presidents, and did not enter into the discussions among the four leaders in the evening. The only public admission that France had raised Russian domestic issues, said Bili, was Chirac's noting during a press conference that all issues, even the most difficult, were evoked.

[1](#)3. (C) POL M/C asked Bili about the format of the meeting and whether France thought this type of arrangement would continue. Bili said France saw the utility of "groupings of variable geometry." The most important aspect of these groupings, he asserted, was that there be a French presence, especially if EU members were involved. Spain had been invited, said Bili, because the Russians had requested that they be included. When asked later if Spain had added any particular points of view to the discussion, Bili noted only that the Spanish government represented 40 million people. (Comment: Ref A reports that Spain had asked Germany and France to be included, while ref B reports a French MFA official saying the inclusion of Spain probably originated with Chirac himself. The one common theme in these discrepant reports is France's "decision" to accept Spanish participation, thus demonstrating, in French eyes, their preeminent role. End comment.) Bili also acknowledged a GOF concern that the March 18 meeting be seen as a continuation of the anti-Iraq Germany-France-Russia meetings, but he said the GOF had worked to convince the French media that the meeting was focused primarily on EU-Russia issues. Bili expressed satisfaction with subsequent local media coverage that he said emphasized the EU-Russia angle.

[1](#)4. (C) Regarding EU-Russia relations, Bili described the "Four Spaces" as more important in the short-term for the EU, and more important in the long-term for Russia. He confirmed ref B reporting that the two most difficult "spaces" remained external relations (e.g., Russia's near-abroad and the EU's New Neighbor policies) and justice/internal issues, among which liberalization of visa regimes remained difficult at the EU-Russia level. Informal summits like March 18 were important to lay the groundwork for formal summits like May 10, said Bili. France believed more personal contacts and dialogue were of great importance when dealing with Russia. (Comment: This also works well for the French. They focus their bilateral relationship with Russia on intimate dialogue and reap commercial and diplomatic benefits. When tough messages must be passed, they punt to the EU. End comment.) When asked if the GOF anticipated future meetings in such a format, Bili said yes.

IRAN AND LEBANON AMONG INTERNATIONAL ISSUES DISCUSSED

15. (C) Bili told POL M/C that the four leaders discussed the full range of international issues, including Ukraine, Kosovo, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Iran and Iraq. Putin supported the French position on Ukraine, said Bili; i.e., full support of Ukraine's political and economic development. On Kosovo, all sides agreed on the necessity of dialogue with the Contact Group, but final status issues were not discussed. Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Putin (and France, Bili acknowledged) were now more positive regarding the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. On Iran, Bili said Russia was quite clear that possession by Iran of nuclear weapons was out of the question. Russia aligned itself with the French position on Iraq, said Bili, and emphasized the importance of Iraq's development of its domestic political structures.

16. (C) Lebanon and Syria were discussed bilaterally, said Bili. France would have preferred that the French-Russian press statement refer to Syria's "immediate withdrawal" instead of "rapid withdrawal," although the GOF was in the end satisfied with the statement, believing the Russians had been as forward leaning as possible despite vestiges of clientitis towards Syria.

17. (C) As an aside to the brief on the March 18 meeting, Bili and POL M/C raised the China arms embargo. Bili believed that the USG and EU had "three to four months" to resolve their differences before the EU would push ahead with a lifting of the embargo (Comment: straddling the end of the Luxembourg Presidency). He said both the EU and the US were guilty of talking past each other, and of not adequately responding to the other's concerns. Now that the issue was being played out in the media, said Bili, it would be difficult for each side to reexamine its position. The office of the French Presidency should have been more aware of the need to explain France's position, said Bili.
Leach